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Longest road project in Iraq is a security success

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Uranium Road from Hit to Al-Asad is getting a $29.6 million makeover in the longest road project by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Iraq. The mission-essential 51-kilometer Alternate Supply Route (ASR), now more than 60 percent finished and targeted for completion in early April, is Phase One of a planned two-stage project.

When pouring 1.5 km sections on the ASR, the Engineers' contracted work force lays down about 500 metric tons of asphalt daily. The asphalt used on the route is produced on a secure site at Al Asad Air Base with equipment brought to Iraq by the Iraqi-owned contractor, Iraq Technical Assistance Services (ITAS) Engineering & Contracting. The 92 pieces of heavy, medium and light equipment include the largest, a D9 Caterpillar bulldozer, for the initial cut and fill work. Extensive asphalt manufacturing modules operate to continually supply the transport dump trucks rotating from Al-Asad to the asphalt pour site.

To keep the work flow as expeditious as possible, the Engineers coordinated with Marine Regimental Combat Team-5 (RCT-5), who manage the battle space area, to direct all convoy traffic to other routes. This diversion allowed more constant application of the asphalt and less time spent on road repair. Routine convoy traffic on Uranium impaired the initial ASR work, requiring periodic restoration of sections that were previously ready for asphalt.

Workers pour hot asphalt onto Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Uranium near Al-Asad Air Base as part of USACE's longest road project in Iraq.
(USACE photo by Lt. Cmdr. James Lee)

Security also played a part in the initial slow progress, however, the contractor's local hiring and purchasing practices helped moderate some of the concerns. ITAS hired additional security to allow more work to occur simultaneously at multiple work sites, and RCT-5 were instrumental in coordinating clearances for them. Security and coordination with the Marines were two key success factors to enable the project to get back on schedule with now a very high likelihood of finishing the job on time or ahead of schedule.

An ITAS worker monitors the flow of hot asphalt into the dump trucks for delivery to the ASR Uranium pour site. (USACE photo by Kendal Smith)

"We are making a daily difference in the lives of my countrymen," said ITAS Iraqi owner, Talat Younis. "When they are working, there is bread for the children, then there is a better life, a more secure one for everybody." More than 300 employees working the site, including 80 Iraqis hired as security forces, are from the nearby cities of Hit and Baghdadi. Younis believes the jobs provided income and stability for the communities. The contractor also makes local purchases of material and equipment rental that he thinks are helpful in keeping the project safely moving along.

"Mr. Younis did a very smart thing by hiring many local nationals from Baghdadi and Hit to work this project," agreed Lt. Cdr. James Lee, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Al-Asad Resident Office Commander. "He's definitely made it of greater interest and concern to the Iraqis in the area. People want to work for him." That was not the only security consideration for Uranium's paving.

Sweeping of the road when convoys were traveling on it resulted in some work stoppages as IEDs were found along the way. With the road completion, expectations are that it will be easier to spot any disturbances along the route and, therefore, make it safer for the Marines and others to travel the road to Al-Asad.

The stages of progress in the road building effort are generally divided in four parts which now occurs simultaneously over the length of the project. They are the initial grading followed by sub-base laydown and compaction, then base course application and, finally, the asphalt pour. Another 49 kilometers of ASR Uranium would repair the road from Al-Asad to Haditha as Phase Two.

A worker monitors the proper asphalt mix and flow through the system by computer.
(USACE photo by Kendal Smith)

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